

MY STORY, YOUR STORY, OUR STORY

STORYTELLING, LEARNING & CULTURAL HERITAGE

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In a short, modern African tale which happened in the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) era, in the imaginary city of ZZ2, we are told that a hyena and a rabbit were close friends. The hyena opened a tuck shop around the corner where they were staying. The rabbit came to the tuck shop to buy some carrots. He asked the hyena if there were carrots. The hyena said no. Five minutes later the rabbit came again to the shop and asked if there were carrots. The hyena said no. Five minutes later the rabbit came again and asked if there were carrots. Again, the hyena said no. By then the hyena was so irritated that he told the rabbit that “next time you come to my store and ask if I have carrots, I will nail you to the wall. Where do you think I have time to stock carrots at such short notice?” Five minutes later the rabbit came again.

“Do you have nails?” asked the rabbit.

“No,” replied the hyena.

“Now that you don’t have nails, do you have any carrots?” asked the rabbit.

In African culture, stories like this one are often told and retold by the griot during the night when the moon is fat in the sky while casting shadows from trees and mountains. Such stories and other oral traditions are narrated while sitting around the fire or during a feast, displaying crests and performing songs, and family praises that confirm the official history of the people.

There are many small stories that feed the big stories, and some stories, that lead to nowhere, vanish into the sands.¹

Writer and entrepreneur Jon Westenberg argues that “storytelling is the greatest technology that humans have ever created.”² In interpreting this statement, we are of the view that he is not talking of disruptive technologies that drive the 4IR,³ but he is talking about storytelling. Even in today’s digital world, leadership is about storytelling. When one is in a leadership position and is able to tell the story—like a proverbial shepherd who opens the kraal and the sheep follow—such a leader will be followed readily by the subordinates.

Furthermore, storytelling can spark a passion for reading in children from a young age and is important for a child’s development. Telling stories allows children to experience different worlds, countries, and traditions. Storytelling has been proven to help develop a sense of empathy as children are encouraged to put themselves in the position of the story’s protagonist, to consider their actions and reactions and why they may have made them. This provides children with a window to new worlds and, without realising it, they are learning valuable life lessons through hearing and engaging in an exciting story.⁴

The advantage of storytelling is that even after the story has been narrated, the griot still has control over his/her story and needs not copyright it but “copyleft” it. This means that the griot can still share this story with others at his or her leisure, thereby creating many not quite identical copies. As further people can continue narrating the story, each time in a slightly different

¹Mpho Ngoepe, “Whose Truth Is True? The Use of Archival Principles to Authenticate Oral History” In P Ngulube (editor), *Handbook of Research on Connecting Research Methods for Information Science Research* (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2020): 307-319.

²Jon Westenberg, “6 Rules of Great Storytelling” (2021), *DeepStash* [online resource] <https://deepstash.com/idea/9391/storytelling-is-the-greatest-technology-that-humans-have-ever-created>; Jon Westenberg, “Storytelling Is The Number One Skill you have to Improve” *Inc42* [online resource] <https://inc42.com/entrepreneurship/storytelling-skill-improve/>.

³The Fourth Industrial Revolution.

⁴Sifundo Nkomo, “Adoption of Web 2.0 technologies in cultivating the reading habits of secondary school learners in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province in Zimbabwe” Thesis (PhD), University of South Africa, Pretoria, 2020.

way, the story is “copylefted.” With storytelling, as in open source software, the narratives can readily be “copylefted”. Borrowed from open source software, “copyleft” is an arrangement whereby software or artistic work may be used, modified, and distributed freely on condition that anything derived from it is bound by the same conditions.⁵ In the process the product is made free in the sense that it is put in the public domain uncopyrighted but instead “copylefted.” Free in this regard does not mean “*mahala*,”⁶ but free to use. These stories are told and retold, thereby becoming dynamic or fluid.

The Department of Information Science (DIS) at the University of South Africa (UNISA) realised that this fluid needs to solidify through the documentation and preservation of these stories for posterity. In response to this perceived need the Department conceived a project to promote storytelling.

Makgabeng Career Expo and Heritage Celebration

In 2013, the Department registered a Community Engagement project with the University’s College of Human Sciences (CHS) titled “Makgabeng Career Expo and Heritage Celebration”⁷ with Mpho Ngoepe as the project manager. The project ran from 2013 until 2016 (in 2017, the project was not funded). The primary aim of this original project was to preserve heritage resources in the Makgabeng area.

The short-term goal was to help learners of schools in the Makgabeng area to decide about their future. The long-term goal was to develop a heritage centre in the area, with a view to of harnessing the area as a tourism destination. The specific objectives of the project were to:

1. educate learners about career choice.
2. share interesting stories in Makgabeng.
3. collect and document indigenous knowledge in the Makgabeng area.

⁵Mpho Ngoepe, “Deployment of Open Source Electronic Content Management Software in National Government Departments in South Africa” *Journal of Science and Technology Policy Management* 6, 3 (2015): 190-205.

⁶Sesotho and isiZulu adverb and adjective for “gratis” or “free.”

⁷“Makgabeng is situated north-west of Polokwane (formerly known as Pietersburg), near Senwabarwana (formerly Bochum)” in the Limpopo Province, South Africa. Tlou Setumu and Mpho Ngoepe, “Converting Oral Narratives into Written Literature” *Mousaion* 34, 4 (2016): 151.

4. encourage preservation of heritage by community members.
5. take heritage to marginalised communities.
6. employ storytelling as a means of income generation.
7. promote heritage as a means of poverty alleviation.

Storytelling and Preservation of Heritage Project

In 2018, Jan Maluleka, a senior lecturer in the Department of Information Science assumed leadership of the project. Given that there was a similar project within the Department (i.e. the Makgabeng Career Expo and Heritage Celebration) the project team decided to consolidate the activities of both projects. This decision gave birth to the “Storytelling and Preservation of Heritage project,” an amendment to and extension of the “Makgabeng Career Expo and Heritage Celebration.”



Fig. 3-1. Bodiela High School learners in a marquee ahead of their storytelling competition (2014)

Source: Prof Samuel Mojaelo

This project aims primarily to revive storytelling in schools and to ensure that there are books available for learners and the community. The project team comprises seven members: Jan Maluleka (project leader), Mpho Ngoepe (project member and researcher), Samuel Mojapelo (project member and researcher), Ngoako Marutha (project member and researcher), Thomas van der Walt (project member and researcher), Marcia Nkwe (project administrator and research assistant) and Mahlatse Shekgola (project administrator and research assistant).

The team achieved all but two of the objectives of the original project and worked towards the implementation of the final two (numbers 3 and 6). As part of the implementation, community members under the leadership of Dr Tlou Setumu recorded traditional music CDs and the team published the stories in a series of books.



Fig. 3-2. Promotional poster of one of the traditional music CDs

Source: Dr Tlou Setumu

Furthermore, the community in which this project operated was in the process of building a community multi-purpose information centre starting with the establishment of a community heritage radio station.

Since 2009 the Department of Information Science has been running storytelling festivals under the leadership of Thomas Van der Walt. Since that date, storytellers from Argentina, Cameroon, Eswatini, Greece, Indonesia, Nigeria, Palestine Senegal, Zimbabwe, and many other countries have been part of this annual event. Besides telling stories, these storytellers also conducted workshops where they share their knowledge and experience with the participants and learners from participating schools.

The objectives for the new, revised project are two-fold, that is, first, to educate school learners in South Africa about storytelling and second, to document documentation of indigenous knowledge on healing herbs. It is worth noting that the storytelling festival has been rotating among the South African provinces since its inception. In 2018, both activities were executed in Limpopo province when the project team decided to focus on a small group of schools in the Limpopo province (see Table 1 for participating schools). These schools in rural Limpopo had few resources and low literacy levels. Among those schools was a ZZ2 farm school in the Tzaneen area.⁸

The aim was to give the project team an opportunity to assess learners over time (2018-2021), producing empirical data that would be analysed and published in journal articles. Activities performed on the day of the storytelling event would start with a storytelling festival with invited storytellers (mainly one local, provincial, national and international storytellers) making presentations in the participating schools. Posters on the walls at the participating schools invite learners who were interested in telling stories to submit their names. Some of the project members and the invited storytellers acted as judges for the storytelling. Three winners for storytelling in each participating schools were given prizes and a Unisa-branded certificate. Their sto-

⁸ZZ2 farms developed after the Anglo-Boer War in 1902 when a regulation was promulgated whereby farmers received a unique registered number to use when branding their livestock. Farmer Burt van Zyl and family, farming in Tzaneen in what is now Limpopo Province received the code ZZ2 in 1903. In later years Burt's grandson (Bertie van Zyl) founded the ZZ2 farming enterprise and, over time, the stock branding code became the standard trade mark of all ZZ2 products.

ries—together with other interesting stories—were published in an anthology of stories edited by members of the project teams.



Fig. 3-3. The three-volume story books in Setswana (v.1-2) and Sepedi (v.3)
Source: Book covers designed by Mr Justice Phukubje

To date (2021), three volumes of stories by learners from different schools in the Limpopo province have been published: Volume 1 in Setswana (by learners of Tiisetso Primary School); Volume 2 in Setswana (by learners of Utsane Secondary School) and Volume 3 in Sepedi (by learners of Kiletsi Primary School and ZZ2 Primary Schools).⁹

⁹ In Setswana, Jan Maluleke and Mpho Ngoepe, (editors), *Boswa Jwa Rona*, Volume 1 (Pretoria: Unisa Department of Information Science, 2019. ISBN: 978-0-620-85189-3) and Jan Maluleke and Mpho Ngoepe, (editors) *Boswa Jwa Rona*, Volume 2 (Pretoria: Unisa Department of Information Science, Pretoria 2019, 978-0-620-85190-9). And in Sepedi, Mpho Ngoepe and Ngoako Marutha, (editors), *Bohwa Bja Rena*, Volume 3 (Pretoria: Unisa Department of Information Science, 2019, 978-0-620-85191-6).

The following story, translated from Sepedi, is an example of the stories told by the learners, in this case Mapula Selowa of ZZ2 Primary School:

A Man with Four Wives by Mapula Selowa

Once upon the time, there was a man with four wives. One day he went out hunting and killed a boar. When he got home, he requested his first wife to prepare it for him. The first wife refused and said she cannot touch or eat pork because the Bible forbids her from eating the meat of any animal that does not chew the cud at night.

“Otherwise, I would be defiled,” said the first wife.

The man then asked the youngest wife to prepare the meat for him. The youngest wife prepared the meat without hesitation. After the meat was deliciously cooked, the man took it and tied it up inside his hut for safe keeping. The next day the man called all his wives to join him on his hunting trip. While on the way to the forest, the eldest wife said to them:

“I forgot my snuff at the house. I am going home to get it,” she quickly turned back and ran back to the house.

She later re-joined the hunt with her husband and the other wives. The hunt continued for the entire day and when the sun went down, they went home. When they got home, the man realised that his meat was missing. He called all his wives to his hut to ask them what had happened to the meat that was prepared for him. All the wives denied having knowledge of what had happened to the meat. The eldest wife went further to tell the husband that, she told him that her religion does not allow her to eat pork as the boar although it has a split hoof, it does not chew cud. The man was very angry and insisted that someone was not telling the truth. All the four wives maintained their innocence. The man decided to seek the services of a traditional healer. There was no way the meat can just disappear in the house that was locked.

The healer threw the divine bones down which told him that the culprit was someone close. He then instructed the man to bring all his wives to him the next morning, but should bear the consequences. Indeed, the next morning the man brought all his wives to the healer. The healer took the wives to the dam outside the village. He placed a rock in the water and performed his rituals. He then asked the wives to go over the rock and told them that whoever manages to go over the rock knew nothing of what happened to the meat.

The youngest wife went first and easily went over the rock. The second and the third wives followed suit and they also crossed. The first wife knew what she did and was a bit hesitant, she gathered some strength and decided to cross because she was already caught in her web of lies. She approached the rock but could not cross. She slipped and fell into the water and drowned. Do you think the first wife ate the meat? If yes, when?¹⁰

A welcome feature of this particular story is that it ends on an interactive note. The storyteller challenges his companions seated around the real or imaginary fire to think about the story's premise and to give their opinions and verdicts. This involves the whole group, strengthening the learning process and the art of storytelling.

Documentation of Indigenous Knowledge

The second leg of the project involves the documentation of indigenous knowledge. It is envisaged that in 2022, the focus will be on the Makgabeng area, where the project began. A network of people has already been established in the area and will be used as a starting point in the collection of indigenous knowledge on herbs. The team will identify key people in the area to be interviewed. This will be followed by the documentation and photographing of various herbs in the area, using local guides.¹¹

¹⁰Mpho Ngoepe and Ngoako Marutha (editors), *Bohwa Bja Rena*, Vol 3. (Pretoria: Unisa Department of Information Science, 2019).

Even though the preparations are done months in advance, project activities usually take place during the first week of September—heritage month—when we invite international storytellers to partner with local storytellers. We plan to visit schools during school hours to engage with the learners and conduct capacity-building workshops in the mornings, engaging with the communities in the afternoons and storytelling events in the evenings when both the visiting and local storytellers will participate.

At schools, we plan to host storytelling competitions where the winners are awarded UNISA-branded certificates. In addition to the storytelling at the schools, Biblionef SA¹² has donated new books to all participating schools with the aim of developing a reading culture among learners. The National Library of South Africa has also made some books available for us to donate to these schools.

Hurdles

Since inception, the project has faced many hurdles, including disruption by the COVID-19 pandemic, funding, and difficulty in establishing sustainable partnerships due to a number of factors. In the 2020 academic year, as the world was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic the project was paused. The virus disrupted lives throughout the world in 2020, and South Africa was placed under tight lockdown. Schools were among the first institutions to close down, even before the official lockdown in March 2020 and this obviously impacted on their learners and on our project.

Although we are able to maintain the relationship with participating schools, some schools have, over the years, stopped participating. Constant communication with the schools has been required to keep the relationships going. Some schools have had a dedicated contact person to serve as the link between the schools and the project team and this has ensured that the relationship with those particular schools has been maintained over the years.

¹¹The project received additional funding from the National Heritage Council for three years starting in 2020 and ending in 2022.

¹²Biblionef is a registered Non-Profit Company established in 1998 as part of an international network of independent organisations with offices in Netherlands, France, Ghana and Tunisia. Biblionef donates new storybooks to organisations with an educational focus to foster a love for reading. *Biblionef SA* [online resource] <http://www.biblionefsa.org.za/>

In some schools, interest was minimal and a lack of enthusiasm from some of the teachers resulted in learners being under-prepared in such schools. Books donated in previous years were not made available for use and, in some instances, the project team discovered that the books were still in boxes a year later. Under such circumstances, the schools ended up withdrawing from the project.

A few other schools fell away because of discontinued partnerships with other stakeholders; for instance, the project had a once-off partnership with the Polokwane Public Library, which invited a number of schools to join the project. When the partnership ended, those schools left the project.

The one factor commonly identified in the schools that left the project was a lack of readiness at school level. For example, even though schools were informed well in advance of the dates of the project programmes, some of these schools would sometimes only start preparing learners when they spotted the Unisa storytelling crew arriving. This meant that learners would be put on the spot without prior preparedness and guidance, a move that hampered their storytelling prowess before the judges.

By contrast, a well-prepared school would erect a huge marquee tent or book the school hall for the day, and invite the school governing body and parents to come and see their children narrate stories in front of the public and the judges. Afterwards, the best narrators would go home with prizes ranging from certificates to trophies.

A potential partnership with the Limpopo Provincial Department of Sport, Arts and Culture was identified in 2018 but failed to take off. As a result, a partnership was established with the Polokwane Municipality through its library services, but it was a once-off arrangement for 2018 and these schools did not participate further in 2019.

So, in 2019, a partnership was established with the Department of Information Science at the University of Limpopo. It is worth mentioning that the University of Limpopo had also participated in the 2015 and 2016 career expos at the Malusi High School.



Fig. 3-4. Three storytelling winners with their UNISA certificates

Source: Prof Samuel Mojaelo

Even though the project encourages participatory involvement oriented at having learners tell their own stories, we have realised that there is always elitism, even in critical emancipation. In some of the schools the team visited, learners were not able to participate freely as teachers frequently wanted to speak on their behalf. In some schools, learners were shy to participate in front of university professors. This example emphasises the presence of elitism and that some people continue to be marginalised, even when applying a critical emancipatory paradigm to community engagement projects.

This resulted in an unbalanced and biased power relation in which the dominant hunters usurped the role of telling the stories of the hunted. In this regard, the lions and lionesses (i.e. teachers and professors) would speak on behalf of the duikers and the ant-eaters (i.e. the learners).

Conclusion and the way forward

In conclusion, we hope that this project will play an important role in stimulating the culture of reading among the “digital natives” within the participating communities. We can learn from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who advised that “if everyone sweeps in front of his own door, the whole world will be clean.”¹³

One way is to introduce reading at an early age through storytelling in any language. We should inculcate the culture of storytelling to children at an early age, for a Sepedi adage reckons: “Šepa la mpša le dubja le sa le meetse, la omelela le a hlaba.”¹⁴

Moving forward, the project aims to involve masters and doctoral students who will be conducting research in this field of heritage and storytelling. It is also hoped that this project will inform curriculum transformation in the Department of Information Science as we are busy revising our undergraduate qualification. With the widespread advent of technology at the forefront, it is threatening the existence and preservation of culture, heritage and indigenous knowledge. Therefore, it is important that projects such as this one, continue to collect and document indigenous knowledge, encourage its preservation, provide education and promote heritage in the children’s mother tongue to alleviate poverty. It is the goal of the project to encourage future vernacular language newsreaders across various media such as television and radio, as well as prominent storytellers who will continue to narrate stories across the world.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed some weaknesses in different communities, among parents, teachers and learners. Parents found ourselves having to spend weeks and months with their own children without them going to school. Teachers had to devise ways to keep on supporting learners using the different technologies available. Rural schools struggled the most because they could not match model C schools when it comes to technological resources that facilitated online teaching. Teachers, learners and parents were

¹³“Let everyone sweep in front of his own door, and the whole world will be clean.” *Goodreads* [online resource] <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/6159938-let-everyone-sweep-in-front-of-his-own-door-and>.

¹⁴“We should bend it (a stick) while it is still wet. In the case of the proverb it refers to children when they are still young.”

not ready for the shift. Parents had to do some teaching at home and to liaise with the teachers more. The project aims to play a facilitating role between the teachers and communities to keep children being educated, even when at home.

Traditionally, an African household would be large and the presence of elders in the family meant that there was always someone present to instil family cultural values in the young ones. This was mostly done through storytelling around the fire at night.

The present project aims to remind parents of their roles. In addition to telling stories to the learners, parents also need to help in teaching their children and to help their children with their school projects, so that the academic progress of learners will not be impacted on by disasters such as COVID-19.

The COVID-19 era has plunged us into unique and anxious times, challenging much of what we have hitherto regarded as our “normal” ways of doing things in our daily lives. This is where storytelling in the home is capable of keeping the flame of reading and learning alive, as well as an active means of preserving the cultural heritage of our community and nation.

